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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001679

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: INDEPENDENT CHRISTIANS NEED SPACE TO RUN AS NON-ALLIED CANDIDATES

REF: BEIRUT 1638

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a November 21 dinner with the Ambassador and visiting NEA/ELA Office Director Nicole Shampaine, former MP Saleh Honein, businessman Neemat Frem, Dr. Paul Charbel, and Richard Jreissati, all Christians considering running as independent candidates in contested districts during the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, complained that there was no space for truly independent candidates. They expressed their interest in remaining separate from the March 14 alliance, while stressing that they shared March 14 principles, naming in particular the importance of the Special Tribunal and of a unified Lebanon. The four argued that Christian votes could be won by delivering a clear message on a key issue, such as fighting corruption or expanding presidential powers, to undecided Christian voters in swing districts. They highlighted the Armenian Tashnaq as a pivotal group in the elections. End summary.

NO SPACE FOR INDEPENDENTS

¶2. (C) The Ambassador invited to dinner several "independent" Christians who are considering running for parliament in the spring 2009 elections. The guests included former MP Saleh Honein, from Baabda; industrialist Neemat Frem, from Ksarwan; and Dr. Paul Charbel and Richard Jreissati, both from Zahle. Honein, who is certain he will run as an independent candidate in Baabda (but is close to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt), faulted the new electoral law and Lebanon's traditional way of conducting elections for not allowing space for independents to run. (Note: Due to the agreements made on districting in May in Doha, and the fact that individual candidates must be part a larger ballot list, there is little room for independent candidates. Candidates can run on unaffiliated lists and leave blank slots where there are no candidates. However, they are more likely to win votes when their names are added to lists with known, party-affiliated candidates. End note.)

¶3. (C) While appearing comfortable with his chances in Baabda, Honein assessed that an independent Christian was

unlikely to win in Zahle. Charbel, who may run depending on signals he perceives from President Michel Sleiman, predicted that Tourism Minister Elie Marouni, who plans to run as a Kataeb candidate, would lose, meaning a loss for March 14 in that crucial district. Jreissati said he was in a similar situation.

BOTH MARCH 8 AND MARCH 14 APPEAL TO "INDEPENDENTS"

¶4. (C) Frem explained that both March 8 and March 14 address issues important to independents: the March 8 alliance focuses on "Christian malaise," while March 14 projects a "Lebanon first" attitude. Honein determined that Aoun is no longer the "Christian defender" as he once promoted himself. Frem stressed repeatedly that he has not yet decided whether he would run in the hotly-contested Ksarwan district,

¶5. (C) Charbel asserted that, "Everyone is chasing after the Christian independents, but no one really wants them!" Honein interjected that these independents should not join the March 14 coalition, but the coalition could find comfort that the independents will vote in step with March 14 on important issues. Honein suggested that the U.S. stress the importance of independent candidates to March 14 members and urge them to give independent candidates space to run.

WIN CHRISTIAN VOTES BY
DELIVERING A CLEAR MESSAGE

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¶6. (C) Honein said that Hizballah has reached its peak popularity, and if it emerges victorious in the 2009 elections, it will have cemented its power and will coast through future elections. Frem predicted that March 14's popularity would suffer if the perceived Salafist threat increased in the period before the elections. Movement on the Special Tribunal would boost March 14 support, Frem emphasized.

¶7. (C) Frem said March 14 and the Christians could control the votes by delivering a clear message on a key issue to the Christians. Charbel said the independent Christian candidates need to promise something to the Christian voters, and then deliver on it when elected. Frem countered that the changes should be enacted ahead of the elections in order to win the votes. Fighting corruption now, especially if March 14 was involved, would draw votes.

¶8. (C) Frem suggested expanding presidential powers, such as extending the length of time allotted to the president to respond to decrees (currently 15 days compared to no time limit imposed on the ministers), or granting the president the right to dissolve the parliament (which he held prior to the Taif agreement). (Note: These are proposals Sleiman himself has advocated. End note.) Honein warned that Hizballah had been discussing amending the presidential powers and therefore, if this were indeed accomplished, Hizballah would attempt to take credit.

COURT THE TASHNAQ

¶9. (C) Honein noted that the independent Christians should work with the Armenian Tashnaq with respect to the elections. He added that the Murrs (MP Michel Murr and his son, Defense Minister Elias Murr), who have previously allied with the Tashnaq in the Metn district, are "not necessarily March 14." He explained that while the Murrs speak the March 14 rhetoric, they may vote differently once elected.

OTHER ELECTION PREDICTIONS

¶10. (C) Given that the Syrians feel threatened by Hizballah's power in Lebanon, Frem speculated, they may create disturbances within Hizballah and between Aoun and Sleiman. Jreissati relayed that Presidential Advisor Nazem Khoury was intending to resign his position in order to run as a candidate. He further reported that he heard Khoury inquired of Marada party leader Suleiman Franjieh whether Aoun would put Khoury on his list in Jbeil.

¶11. (C) Comment: Although President Sleiman is likely to continue resisting forming his own parliamentary bloc, preferring to remain above legislative politics, Christian independents could play a useful role drawing support away from the March 8 opposition in the election and in enhancing the presidency in promoting moderate stances in the parliament. We predict the situation on alliances and candidate selection will remain fluid, however, for several more months -- perhaps as late as April if the vote is set for June, as many believe. End comment.

SISON